

THE REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD

1760–1800



Like the Puritans and the first Southern settlers, Americans who lived through the second half of the eighteenth century often wrote in order to understand and report on their lives in North America. But they wrote in a different spirit from that of the earlier writers. A single event commanded their attention, and the America they lived in was less a wilderness than it had been.

The Age of Reason

Writers of this period were all conscious of belonging to what is called the Age of Reason. Whether English or American, they believed that by using reason human beings could manage themselves and their societies without depending on authorities and past traditions. Reason, they also believed, thrived on freedom—freedom of speech, freedom from arbitrary rulers, freedom to experiment, freedom especially to question existing laws and institutions. By the free use of reason, human beings could progress: social evils could be corrected, superstition and ignorance ended, and the general quality of existence improved.

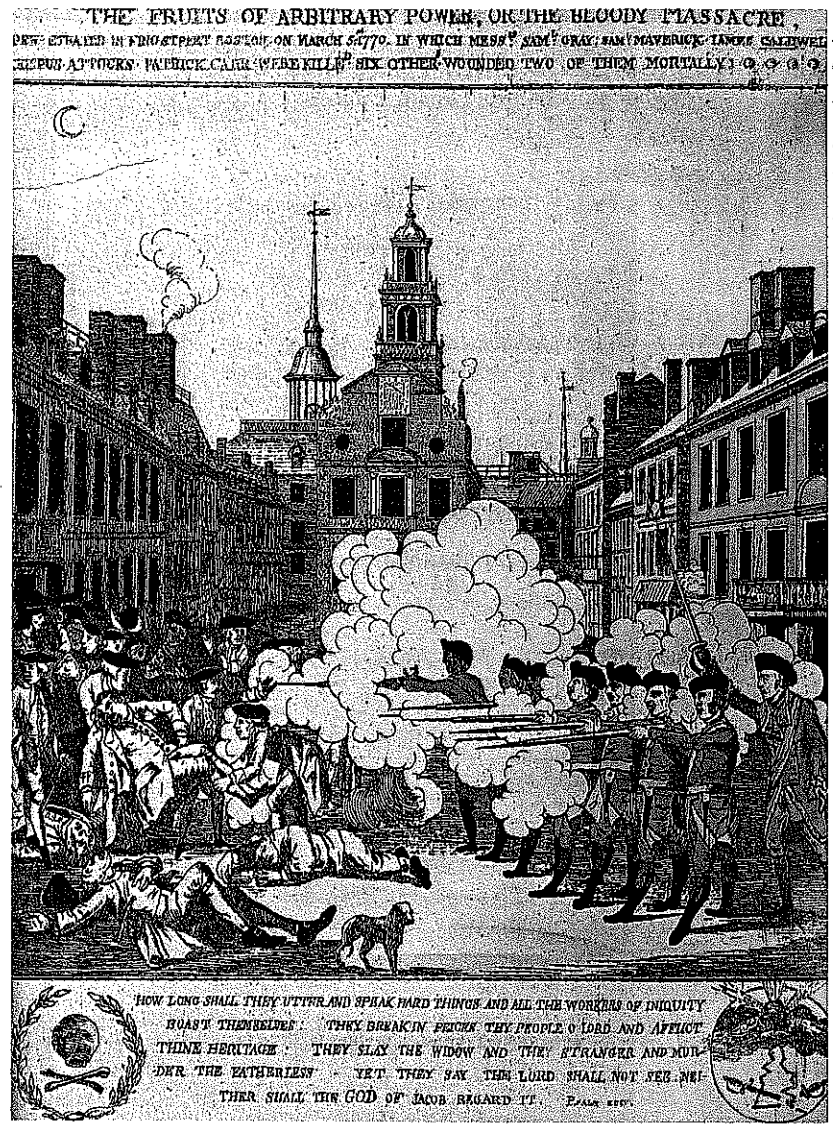
The leading writers of the period concerned themselves with the state of life on earth. Unlike the Puritans, they had little interest in the hereafter or the supernatural. They tended to write on science, ethics, or government rather than on religion. Typical of the spirit of the Age of Reason are such men as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson—Franklin by his ingenious inventions designed to make life more comfortable, Jefferson by his hatred of any restriction on human inquiry, and both men by their love of moderation and order.

Americans of the Age of Reason differed in one dramatic way, however, from their English contemporaries. They were given the chance to test their ideas about freedom and progress by creating a new society. The chance came when the thirteen colonies decided—or, as they felt, were forced—to become independent.

The American Revolution

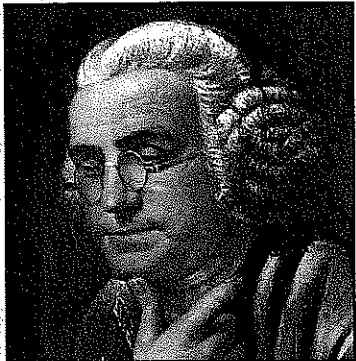

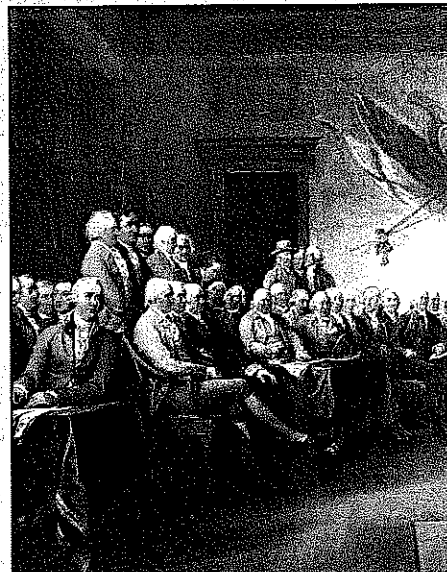
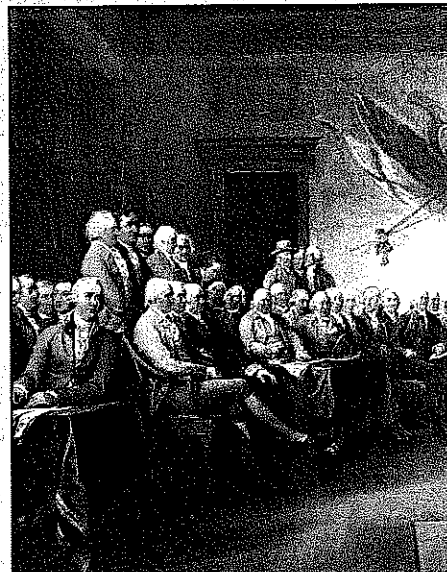
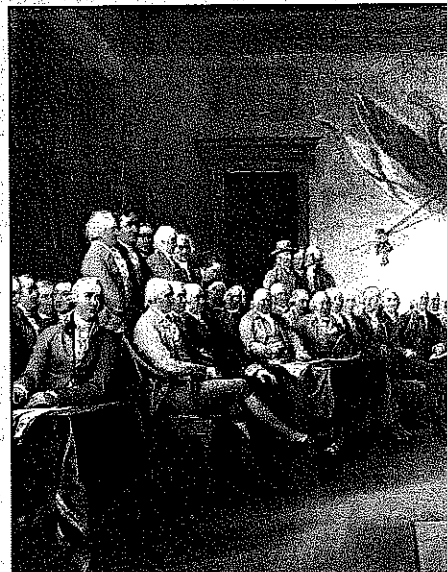
The American Revolution was fought not only with muskets but also with thousands of pamphlets, essays, songs, poems, and speeches. As had not been true earlier, citizens of New England, of the South, and of the Middle Colonies began writing about a single, vastly important subject. In doing so they began to think of themselves not as New Yorkers or Rhode Islanders or Virginians, but as Americans.

The war of words began around 1763. The English government started a program of taxing the colonies to help pay the costs of the French and Indian War and of protecting America from other European nations in the future. Americans wrote, argued, and dem-



Boston Massacre, or "Fruits of Arbitrary Power" by Henry Pelham (1749–1806).

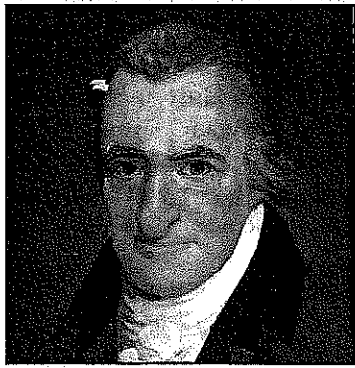
onstrated against the taxes noisily enough to persuade England to withdraw the Stamp Act of 1765. Fearing that such a retreat would be taken for weakness, England imposed a new tax program in 1767, the Townshend Acts. When Americans again reacted with angry essays and speeches, and refused to buy English products as well, the mother country sent eight hundred soldiers into Boston. On March 5, 1770, the troops killed five persons on King Street. After this "Boston Massacre," Britain again backed down, withdrawing both the Townshend Acts and the troops.

1723	BENJAMIN FRANKLIN (1706–1790) arrives in Philadelphia	
	FRANKLIN <i>Poor Richard's Almanack</i> (1732–1757)	
1740–1745	The “Great Awakening”	
1752	Franklin experiments with lightning; discovers it is electrical	
1754–1763	French and Indian War	
1765	Stamp Act	
1767	Townshend Acts	
	First American play produced, <i>The Prince of Parthia</i> (1767)	
1770	Boston Massacre	
	FRANKLIN begins <i>Autobiography</i> (1771)	
1773	Boston Tea Party	
	PHILLIS WHEATLEY (1753?–1784) <i>Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral</i> (1773)	
1774	First Continental Congress assembles in Philadelphia	
1775–1783	Revolutionary War	

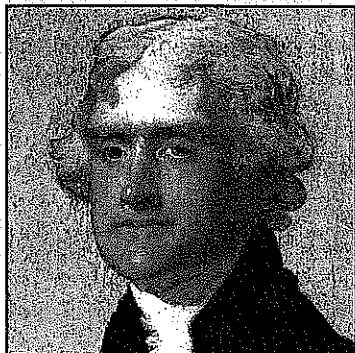
Benjamin Franklin

Boston Massacre

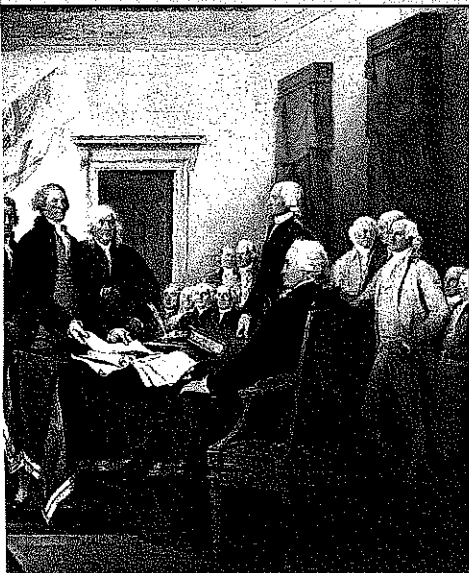
The Declaration of Independence



Thomas Paine



Thomas Jefferson



PATRICK HENRY (1736–1799)
“Speech in the Virginia Convention” (1775)

1775 Battle of Lexington and Concord

Second Continental Congress assembles in Philadelphia (1775)

THOMAS PAINE (1737–1809)
Common Sense (1776);
The Crisis (1776–1783)

THOMAS JEFFERSON (1743–1826)
The Declaration of Independence (1776)

1778 Treaty of Alliance with France

1781 Cornwallis surrenders to Washington at Yorktown, Virginia, ending all serious fighting on the American continent

MICHEL-GUILLAUME JEAN DE CRÉVECOEUR (1735–1813)
Letters from an American Farmer (1782)

1788 Ratification of Constitution

1789 George Washington inaugurated as first President of the United States

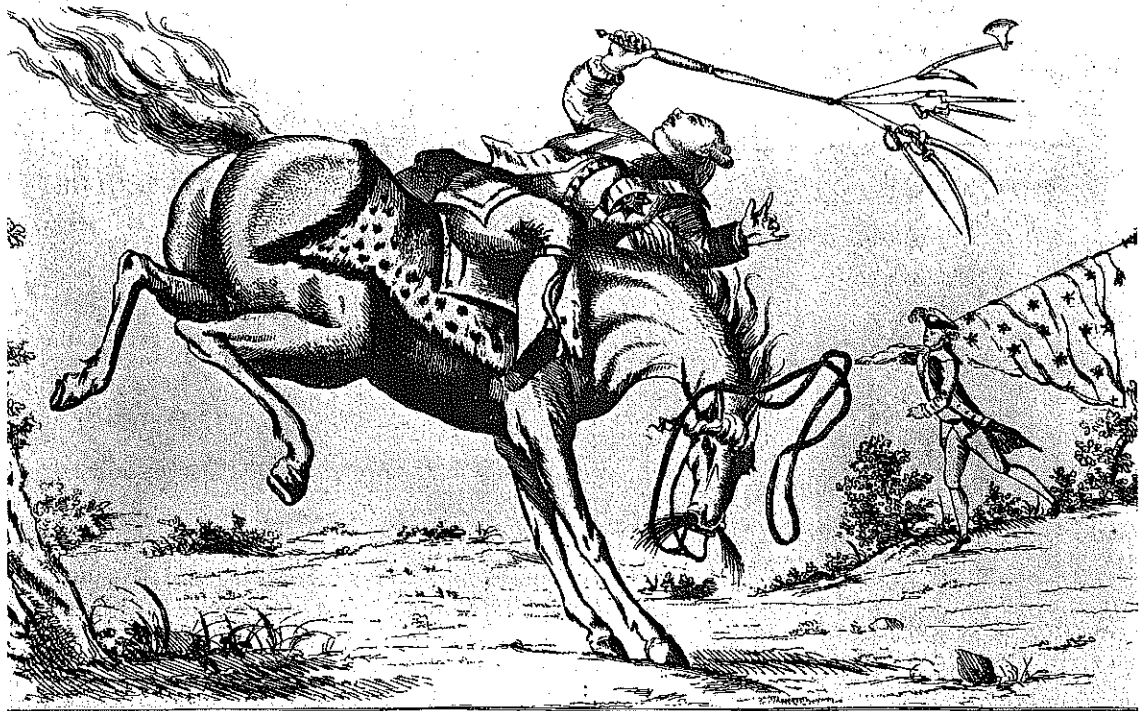
First American novel published, *The Power of Sympathy* (1789)

1800 Washington, D.C., named capital of the United States

Peace and quiet followed, but only for three years. In 1773 Parliament set a new tax on tea. That December, some Bostonians dumped chests full of the taxed tea into their harbor—an event that became known as the Boston Tea Party. Parliament decided to punish not only the demonstrators, but the whole city. It closed Boston Harbor, reducing the city's food supply and stopping its trade. Moreover, Parliament passed acts that virtually abolished the government of Massachusetts. Enraged and frightened, other colonies aided Boston and met in Philadelphia in 1774 as a congress of colonists to decide what to do.

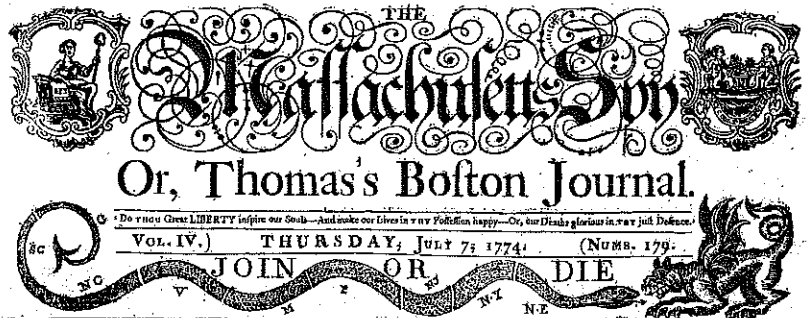
War had not been declared, but the American Revolution had begun. In March 1775 the young lawyer Patrick Henry announced to the Virginia Assembly: "There is no longer any room for hope. . . . we must fight! I repeat it, sir, we must fight!" Three months later British troops attacked American strongholds on Bunker Hill near Boston, killing about one hundred fifty Americans and wounding about three hundred. By the following year, Congress asked

The Horse America Throwing His Master (1779). In this cartoon King George holds a riding whip made up of hand weapons.
Library of Congress



THE HORSE AMERICA, throwing his Master.

Published at the old direction, Jan. 17, 1779, by J. M. White, at Court, Westminster.



Join or Die, a popular slogan, as used in *The Massachusetts Sun, or Thomas's Boston Journal*, July 7, 1774.

Library of Congress

another young Virginia lawyer, Thomas Jefferson, to draft a document declaring to the world that the colonies were now “free and independent states.”

American and British armies fought each other across America for the next seven years. The Americans at first met with defeat. A few months after the Declaration of Independence, Washington’s army was pushed out of New York and across New Jersey. In this crisis an English immigrant named Tom Paine wrote a passionate essay assuring Americans that “though the flame of liberty may sometimes cease to shine, the coal can never expire.” His assurance proved true in 1781, when Washington took his army to Yorktown, Virginia, and made an American victory certain by forcing the surrender of some ten thousand British troops. In 1788 a new country, the United States of America, began to exist under a democratic constitution.

The Growth of American Culture

Amid the uproar and gunfire occurred a second, very different revolution. The arts in America flourished as never before. They did so partly because by 1763 America had existed for one hundred fifty years and

was ready for a richer cultural life, and partly because the Revolution itself inspired people to express their feelings and ideas, but mostly because during the Revolutionary period American cities grew swiftly and the country’s population almost doubled. When the Frenchman Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur pictured the new land for Europeans in 1782, he told them that “an hundred years ago all was



The Death of General Wolfe (1770) by Benjamin West (1738–1820).
Oil on canvas.
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

wild, woody, and uncultivated.” But new immigrants to America, he said, would now behold “fair cities, substantial villages, extensive fields, an immense country filled with decent houses, good roads, orchards, meadows, and bridges. . . .”

Artistic achievements that were common in Europe but new to America appeared at every stage of the Revolution. In 1767, only months before Parliament passed the Townshend Acts, actors known as The American Company gave the first professional production of an American play, *The Prince of Parthia*. A year after the Boston Massacre, a Philadelphia Quaker named Benjamin West exhibited in London a painting called *The Death of General Wolfe*, whose method of depicting a historic event influenced European art. In the same year that his townsmen dumped the hated tea, a Boston leather worker named William Billings published *The New-England Psalm-*

Singer, the first volume of American-composed music. Months before George Washington was inaugurated as President in 1789, newspapers advertised the publication of *The Power of Sympathy*, the first American novel.

The years from 1763 to 1789 added much else to American culture: the building of a string of theaters from New York to Charleston; the first native American actor and dancer; the first American museums; the first American epic poems; several painters who still rank high in the history of American art, such as John Singleton Copley, John Trumbull, Charles Willson Peale, and Gilbert Stuart; and two remarkable women—Patience Wright of New Jersey, the first American sculptor, and Phillis Wheatley of Boston, a young black slave who became a celebrated poet.

Some of these achievements have now been forgotten. But to Americans at the time, it seemed that while gaining political independence, the country had also shown artistic excellence, and that for both reasons the United States could now claim a place of dignity and importance beside Europe.

Collection of the Newark Museum,
Gift of Jay B. Tomlinson 1956



Admiral Richard Howe (c. 1770),
miniature wax sculpture
by Patience Wright (1725–1786).

Review

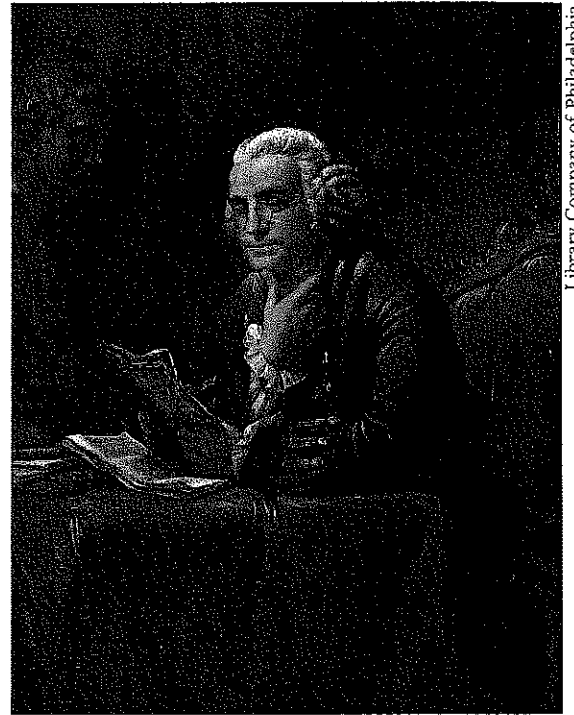
1. What did writers of this period believe could be accomplished through the free use of reason?
2. What subjects were writers of the Age of Reason concerned with?
3. What led the English government to begin a harsh program of taxing the colonies?
4. Name three individuals who helped fight the American Revolution with words rather than muskets.
5. What factors were responsible for the flourishing of American culture during the Revolutionary period?

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

1706–1790

“The First American,” as Benjamin Franklin has been called, was born in the capital of New England Puritanism, Boston, just as Puritanism was dying out. He left Boston at the age of seventeen, but Puritan ideals stayed with him. As Puritans hoped to be made pure by God’s grace, he tried to make himself morally perfect by self-discipline. He failed to do so, but he did carry out another kind of self-transformation. By cleverness and hard work he changed himself from the poorly educated son of a candle- and soap-maker into a world-famous scientist, diplomat, philosopher, and writer.

A few paragraphs cannot describe, but only list, Franklin’s many interests and accomplishments. He made his living mostly as a hard-working Philadelphia printer. But he also helped improve the city’s pavements, street lighting, sanitation, fire companies, and police; ran a magazine and a newspaper; founded or helped to found a debating club, a hospital, the American Philosophical Society, the first circulating library in America, and the college that became the University of Pennsylvania; studied earthquakes, ocean currents, and wind; improved or invented the lightning-rod, bifocal eyeglasses, a device for lifting books off high shelves, a rocking chair that could swat flies, a musical instrument made of moistened glass bowls called the armonica, and a stove that was sold throughout America and Europe; addressed the English House of Commons on the Stamp Act, drew an important political cartoon, and served as first Postmaster General of America; assisted in creating the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States; discovered the laws of electricity (for which



Benjamin Franklin by James Reed Lambdin (1807–1889). Oil on canvas.

he won honorary degrees from Harvard and Yale and a gold medal from the English Royal Academy); and became perhaps the first American millionaire.

Franklin was also a brilliant writer. Following his precept that writing should be “smooth, clear, and short,” he perfected the Puritan plain style. He kept a huge correspondence and wrote on everything from love to musical harmony to chess. Most popular among his earlier works were the *Poor Richard* almanacs, noted for their witty sayings. (According to one story, the Continental Congress was afraid to let him draft the Declaration of Independence because he might slip a joke into it.) During the war he wrote cutting satires on British policy such as “An Edict by the King of Prussia.” In 1771 he began his *Autobiography*, describing his rise from “poverty and obscurity . . . to a state of affluence and some

THE REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD (1760–1800)

Introduction (Pages 66–73)

1. Explain how writers during the Age of Reason believed human beings could progress.

2. Describe the main difference between the writers of the Age of Reason and Puritan writers.

3. Describe why the American Revolution first began as a war of words.

4. Identify each of the following events:

a. the Boston Massacre _____

b. the Boston Tea Party _____

NAME _____

CLASS _____ DATE _____

STUDY GUIDE—CONTINUED

c. the Battle of Bunker Hill _____

5. Identify the following works by American revolutionaries and briefly explain the significance of each.

a. *The Death of General Wolfe* _____

b. *The Power of Sympathy* _____

c. *The New-England Psalm-Singer* _____

6. In your own words, explain why the growth of American culture was as important to the revolutionaries as gaining political independence.

**Selection
Test**

NAME _____

CLASS _____ DATE _____ SCORE _____

THE REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD

Historical Introduction (Pages 66–73)

Directions: Write the letter of the best answer to each question. (10 points each)

1. Most American writers of the Revolutionary Period were *least* concerned with

a. science	c. government	
b. ethics	d. religion	1. _____
2. All of the following Revolutionaries were born in America *except*

a. Benjamin Franklin	c. Patrick Henry	
b. Thomas Jefferson	d. Thomas Paine	2. _____
3. The Age of Reason emphasized

a. order and moderation	c. authority and tradition	
b. religious tolerance	d. existing laws and institutions	3. _____
4. Before the colonies and England went to war, the Americans had fought with all of the following *except*

a. speeches	c. demonstrations	
b. pamphlets	d. blockades	4. _____
5. The "Boston Massacre" caused England to

a. withdraw the Townshend Acts and English troops	
b. place soldiers in private homes	
c. reduce the city's food supply	
d. declare war on the colonies	5. _____
6. After the Boston Tea Party, the English Parliament

a. imposed a new tax on tea	c. closed Boston Harbor	
b. passed the Stamp Act	d. took hostages	6. _____
7. The English Parliament united the colonies by

a. sending troops into Boston	
b. putting a tax on tea	
c. passing the Stamp Act	
d. virtually abolishing the government of Massachusetts	7. _____
8. The Declaration of Independence came into being because of

a. the Continental Congress	c. Parliament	
b. the Virginia Assembly	d. the Continental Army	8. _____
9. All of the following people were painters *except*

a. John Singleton Copley	c. Gilbert Stuart	
b. John Trumbull	d. Phillis Wheatley	9. _____

NAME _____

CLASS _____ DATE _____

SELECTION TEST—CONTINUED

10. Between 1763 and 1789 all of the following occurred *except* one. Which was the exception?

- a. An acting company performed the first American play.
- b. An American painter achieved success and fame in Europe.
- c. Numerous writers published popular American novels.
- d. The first American museums opened.

10. _____